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SUBJECT: GSE LIGHTENS UP ON TRAVEL, VISAS, AND POUCHES

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In recent weeks, Post has seen a marked loosening of restrictions in our interactions with the GSE, and since the inauguration of President Obama, GSE officials have been uncharacteristically cordial and cooperative. The three major local bilateral irritants-- TDY visas, pouches, and in-country travel restrictions-- have diminished and we have heard travel restrictions for diplomats may soon be liberalized. End Summary.

#### Loosening of Travel Restrictions

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¶2. (C) Since December 20, we have received fourteen travel permits-- three for Gura, three for Qohaito, and eight for Massawa. We had been refused multiple times before for the latter two towns for both personal and official trips. In the same time period, no travel permits were denied. Post heard from other diplomats in Asmara that the GSE said the requirement for travel permits would be abolished.

#### And TDY Visas

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¶3. (C) The TDY visa situation has likewise improved. The latest visa granted was to a comsec auditor who will visit post the week of February 1. In recent months, the GSE also granted visas to a security systems technician, our OBO area manager, and a consular systems technician. Since these visas pre-date the sudden warmth, we believe the GSE granted them because we had made it clear that the lack of maintenance was undermining our operations and endangered our ability to keep this embassy-- and by extension theirs-- open.

#### Holding Our Breath on Pouches

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¶4. (C) Since resolving last fall's dust-up over the detention of 26 pouches containing computer equipment, our unclassified pouch deliveries have proceeded expeditiously. We collect all pouches the morning after their late-night arrival as soon as the airport customs office opens. We have been able to halt the stop-gap Fedex pouch deliveries, which were expensive. The paranoid regime views the diplomatic pouch as a threat; most diplomatic missions in Asmara have had pouch difficulties, including delays and inspections. It's hard to see the GSE letting go of control of the pouch. We will, however, attempt another classified pouch delivery in the next month, one that will include cargo in the aircraft hold.

#### Tapping into their Inner Party Animal

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¶5. (C) While GSE officials have been willing to accept our social invitations, in our memory not one has been extended to us until this week. Yemane Ghebreab invited the ambassador and his wife to a lavish lunch with other Eritrean officials. Throughout the event, Yemane kept the tone light and the conversation away from official business. At a recent reception for the new British DCM, our main MFA contacts were unusually warm; even the normally grouchy chief of protocol was positively jolly (though perhaps it was because the weight of office was about to be lifted from him. He has since moved on.).

#### Making Hay While the Sun Shines

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¶6. (C) While we believe the GSE, perhaps even Isaias himself, is sincere about wanting better relations with the Obama Administration, we are not certain the government understands

what we would require to put our relationship on a normal footing, particularly with regard to Somalia. We will continue to spell out in the clearest terms possible our concerns and expectations. GSE sources claim a new draft policy focused on "Engaging with the United States on Areas of Mutual Interest" is nearly finished, and includes sections penned by Isaias himself. We have noted the daily propaganda blast against the United States has stopped. In the meantime, we will take advantage of the current lessening of restrictions to get out of Asmara as much as possible, schedule visits for long-overdue temporary duty personnel, and bring in much-needed equipment.

MCMULLEN